

The Implication of Hamlet's Madness
Lec. Lina Muhssen Abd Ali
College of Education for Human Sciences\ University of Babylon

نتيجة جنون هاملت

م. لينا محسن عبد الله

كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/ جامعة بابل

linamuhssen33@yahoo.com

الخلاصة:

تعتبر مسرحية هاملت واحدة من اكثر المسرحيات التراجيدية اهمية في الادب الانكليزي. تحتوي المسرحية على تحليل نفسي للشخصية الانسانية والميول الخفية في الطبيعة البشرية. تعتبر فكرة الجنون احد النقاط المهمة المقدمة من قبل شكسبير في المسرحية. يقدم البحث فكرة الجنون كتقنية متبناة من هاملت للوصول الى هدفه كما هو واضح في مواقف الشخصيات الاخرى من حوله.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هاملت، الجنون، الانتقام.

Abstract

Hamlet is regarded as one of the most important tragedies in the history of English Literature. It contains a psychological analysis for the human personality and the hidden tendencies in the human nature. Madness is an important idea presented by Shakespeare in the play. The research deals with madness as a technique adopted by Hamlet to achieve his aims as expressed by the attitudes of the other characters.

Keywords: Hamlet, Madness, Revenge

Hamlet ,written in 1602 ,is one of the best pieces of writings which occupies a special position among the superior works of art.¹ Most readers first hear of Hamlet as a story in which revenge is the central theme between 1180 and 1208.Saxo Grammaticus ,a Danish historian had written down the story of Hamlet or as it was called Amleth. The story of Amleth , prince of Jutland ,is found in the third and fourth books of the Historia Danica, by Saxo. According to Saxo , Amleth was a legendary hero from the tenth century who was locked for many years in a bloody struggle with his enemies. His father Horwendil , Governor of Jutland , is killed by his brother , Fergon , who takes the throne and marries Gerutha (Amleth's mother).

Another version of the story is given by Francois Belleforest. In the fifth series of his Histories Tragiques (1578),a second story of Hamlet is mentioned.² Yet most critics are sure that Shakespeare's original source was a play written by Thomas Kyd and performed in London before 1590.The play is called Ur-Hamlet. History relates that this play includes similar elements to Shakespeare's Hamlet because both begin with a ghost demanding vengeance , both are dealing with madness(real and feigned),both contain a play within the play , both have the death of an innocent women.³

Thus , it can be concluded that Shakespeare' s version of a young man's bloody struggle to avenge his father's murder can trace its original roots to Saxo , Belleforest , and Kyd's Ur-Hamlet, versions of Amlethus , prince of Denmark.⁴

By observing the text, it seems that the play does not have the idea that Hamlet was completely insane. There is nothing in the play which shows Hamlet to be "one sidedly reflective " or "indisposed to action. "Nobody has revealed that weakness and considered as only a "scholar" who has never "formed resolution or executed a deed."⁵ Right from the very beginning the readers notice that in the court he is respected by everyone and he is the favorite of all the people. Also , he was admired to be 'the observed of all observers'⁶,as Ophelia says:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue ,sword,
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers-quite, quit down! (III.i.150-3)

Fortinbras , a man of action— "a sufficiently" active man —and the prince of Norway , assumed that Hamlet has proved to be of a high rank ; and at the end of the play he ordered four soldiers to bury him as a soldier. It is clear that he did not consider Hamlet as a weak man or a mad person.

If Hamlet was an expert in "acting," he must be at the same time expert in "fencing" which he has done even in his worst situations. This is clear in the duel-match when he told Horatio that:"Since he[Laertes]went into France ,I have been in continual practice,/I shall win at the odds."(V.ii.193-4)Hamlet was completely honest, frank, and kind, simple with everyone regardless of their social position; and as a result he was loved and respected by all. This does not mean at all that he was timid and naïve.He has the ability to face any sort difficulty and cruelty , so , he must be very brave and ready to take action.Because it is impossible that a person who is shown as running after a ghost , murdering Polonius even if by accident for taking him to be the King—his uncle and the murderer of his father ,acting and responding to the King's tricks in sending him to be killed ,"leaping into the grave" of Ophelia ,and finally fulfilling his revenge, could on any standard be considered weak or insane.⁷

Hamlet's relation with his mother, Gertrude, is a special one.Many critics discuss their relation and tackle it from different points of view. Hamlet's meeting with the ghost of his father revealed two things for him. First, he knows about the murdering of his father by his uncle. Second, he knows about his mother's betrayal to his father, that she has betrayed her husband while he was alive and left her "celestial bed" to "prey on garbage,"⁸

But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though loudness court it in a shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed,
And prey on garbage. (I.v.53-7)

It means that Claudius did not only satisfy himself by killing Hamlet's father, and marrying his mother , but also he participated in destroying the image of his mother who was the symbol of chastity for him which effects later on his relation with Ophelia.⁹At this stage Hamlet is ready to get rid of his life, but only religion stands between him and suicide. His real problem is not the death of his father, which caused him to be so melancholic, but it is shown clearly in his soliloquy:

O God! a beast ,that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourned longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules! Within a month,(I.ii.150-3)

The moral shock which came to him from the speedy marriage of his mother caused a lot of disturbance to his mental state. As if this marriage was similar to a mask which has fallen from the mother's face while he is in the middle of his distress. The moral shock was so great because it was preceded by a completely different image for the mother. She has a deep love for her husband that she followed his body "like Niob , all tears," but within a month she married again a man who is "utterly contemptible and loathsome" in Hamlet's eyes. So, Hamlet regards this marriage no more than "incestuous wedlock". "She married—O ,most wicked speed, to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!/It is not nor it cannot come to good./ But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!(I.ii.156-9)

Consequently, the result was identification to women's nature to be frail. The two words "women and frailty" became attached to each other; and whenever the word "brief" is said, it gives one feeling to Hamlet which is "a woman's love." In spite of all these facts and following his father's advice,

Hamlet keeps on treating his mother politely, simply because Gertrude can hardly be responsible for the events she is caught in.¹⁰

The queen has a weak personality to stand against the strong personality of a man. Thus , she first appears "echoing" the prayers of her husband (Claudius) that Hamlet should settle in the castle and not to go back to the University. Truly, Hamlet never put a question about her chastity, as if having a tendency to see only the good side of his mother ; unless he is forced to see the opposite. Yet, she has a clear mind because not everything is able to put a veil on her eyes, especially in relation to Hamlet's strange behavior:

He[Polonius]tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found

The head and source of all your son's distemper.

[Queen]I doubt it is no other but the main !

His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage. (II.ii.54-7)

She is unable to believe that her son is suffering from love-madness as Polonius says and tries to prove this. But after that , she hopes that Ophelia is the reason behind "Hamlets disturbance of mind."¹¹

The important and effective appearance for the Queen is when she meets Hamlet in her room. Hamlet enters the room in a mood of "excitement," and the Queen realizes that it is difficult to make a discourse with him that is why she tried to end their meeting, "Nay then, I'll set those to you that can speak."(IV.i.33)But Hamlet has no intention to leave the room that is why he takes his mother by arm and puts her in a seat. He confesses to her his real state or condition, inspite of his original state of being suspicious about her.¹² The king is always in front of his eyes even in his most special moments:

A murderer and a villain,

A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe

Of your precedent love ; a vice of kings;

A cutpurse of the empire and the rule

That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,

And put it in his pocket! (IV.i.93-8)

Hamlet tells the situation as he sees it, but refuses to accuse her of adultery. In dealing with her , he is "polite" and not "satirical," that means he still keeps part of his motherly love towards her. Hamlet's relation with his mother is so deep and strong , but her love is "colourless" because of the presence of her husband. Certainly, in her room he never speaks to her in the way of half-crazy and he was sure that she entered willingly in her marriage; but still he treated her kindly that we later on compare this treatment to Ophelia's cruel treatment¹³.His gentleness is very clear in his speech when he says:

But go not to my uncle's bed;

Assume a virtue, if you have it not

Refrain tonight;

And that shall lend a kind of easiness

To the next abstinence....(III.iv.160-8)

So, at the end of Hamlet's meeting with his mother and after killing Polonius, it is clear that the real reason for Hamlet's disturbance is the hasty marriage of his mother; and he is not really mad but only pretending to be so in order to get more freedom in dealing with others.

Claudius, the king and the killer of his father, stands for the essential evil in the play, because he killed his brother and took the throne by marrying the wife of the dead king with complete awareness and carelessness. He is ready even to sacrifice religion in order to keep the throne. Hamlet describes the king's state when he compares "the world" to "an unweeded garden," and "things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely." (I.ii.136-7)Rank is the term used by Hamlet to describe his uncle, and to have something "merely" does not mean at all that you won the thing.

Claudius is completely aware of Hamlet's suspicion about him and the real reason behind his supposed madness, but he tried to convince himself that it is only a love-madness.The ghost appearance

in the play is very important because it makes Hamlet more careful about seeking revenge. Being a ghost, he must have full information about the things happened in the world. The function of the ghost is to give a history of the events that lead to Claudius' accession to the throne. From this moment on Hamlet puts the "antic-disposition"¹⁴ to help fulfilling his revenge ,as he tells Horatio: "As I, perchance, hereafter shall think meet/To put an antic-disposition on."(I.v.171-2)

So, the ghost of his father will be at rest when he puts the wrong things right. Hamlet needs something to help taking revenge, and he decided that it is "madness." He is to feign madness in order to protect himself in the court and Horatio is the only one who knows his decision.¹⁵ Horatio is ready to sacrifice his life for Hamlet's sake. From the very beginning ,the audience notice his love for Hamlet when he prevents him from going after the ghost, because he was afraid that the ghost may be a bad spirit and may change to another causing Hamlet's disorder¹⁶.According to Bennett, Hamlet is weak in front of the ghost revealing his readiness to do what the ghost commands¹⁷.Horatio is the only one who knows about Hamlet's "mousetrap-play," and side by side they arrange to see the kings reaction. When Hamlet was on his voyage to England , he wrote to Horatio a letter telling him about his journey and escape. With him, Hamlet is to be quite, calm, and normal ; he keeps his friendship to Hamlet even to the time of the "fencing-match." Their love for each other extends to the last moments in Hamlet's life when he points the task of telling his real story and the course of his life to Horatio. Horatio wants to kill himself because his best friend is about to die, but Hamlet says, "Absent thee from felicity awhile,/And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/To tell my story." (V.ii.329-331)Horatio accepts his task and keeps controlling the situation to the last moment in the play. He tells the English ambassador about what has happened and orders that the bodies of the dead (Hamlet, King, Queen, and Laertes) must be shown to the public as an evidence of what has happened. Horatio, the most intellectual, remains the master of his emotions and feelings to the end of the play, and even when others give away.

It seems that Hamlet and Horatio are similar to each other but Laertes is completely different. Because he is " a man of action," and when he heard that his father was killed he did not wait for proves in order to take revenge; but instead he rushes and tries to kill Hamlet at once. Also, he has a strange ability and readiness to make sure that Hamlet is going to be killed in the duel. At the same time the audience may think that he is justified because he suffered greatly due to the death of his father and sister. At the end of the play, Laertes returned to his good nature confessing his guilt and stating that the king is responsible for all the killings.¹⁸

One of the things stated in the play to be the reason behind Hamlet's madness is Ophelia's love. She is a weak character in comparison with the other characters that she accepts whatever her father or brother advises her to do. For instance , when Laertes asks her to forget Hamlet because "[She]...must fear,/His greatness weighed, his will is not his own/For he himself is subject to his birth. (I.iii.16-18)She is ready to accept his advice , but with her father she seems unsure "I don't know my lord , what I shall think. " (I.ii.103)

Polonius tried to assure the king and queen that Hamlet's problem is only love-madness. As a result, he and the king decided to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia when they are alone. Before this there was an important speech between Polonius and Hamlet in which Hamlet makes fun of Polonius and the later understand it to be "madness," but with some sense in it.

The tragic role played by Ophelia seems to be sometimes a great mystery because she is an innocent character and does not deserve the harsh treatment she receives from Hamlet. The words "frailty" and "short" became connected with women in general and with Ophelia in particular , as if she is fated to carry the "burden" of his mother's sin.¹⁹

Though Hamlet treats her harshly , yet he loves her passionately as if his love is pushing him like "flames" out of his breast,²⁰ "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/Loved not ,with all their quantity of love/Make up may some. (V.i.250-2)

Being a revenge play , Hamlet contained the important theme of madness. The play is enlarged in order to give the hero time to use madness properly to reach to his aims. Hamlet told Horatio about his "antic-disposition" asking him to keep this secret because of being insane he is free to perform any action and is held irresponsible for these actions , at the same time. Even the ghost of his father seems to support this idea of pretending madness through the repetition of the word "swear." And when they swear the spirit is in rest, "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!" (I.v.182)

Madness is a means to an end which supplies a chance for Hamlet to observe all people around him without being responsible for the acts he performs. Hamlet is searching for proof about the crime against his father and for an opportunity to kill the murderer; that is why he thinks people to be free when talking in front of an insane person. Thus, Hamlet was safe and sound from the bad consequences of his speech for he is mad and has no control over himself. This fact makes him cover his true nature under the mask of madness or mental disorder.²¹ Skulsky believed that Hamlet suffers from "the brief madness" which controls his unacceptable speech with his mother.²²

Hamlet is one of the great plays in the history of English Literature. In comparison to other works of art ,it could be said for sure that it has received a great deal of discussion and analysis. The idea of madness has been one of the argumentative points in the play to the extent that the critics held different opinions and interpretations for Hamlet's madness.It seems that the "Freudian Oedipal theory" is the dominating theory in the side of analyzing the behavior of Hamlet.²³

Hamlet's madness is a feigned one. He is not really a mad person but only mad "in craft". He used this madness as a means to an end.Because of the difficulty of his situation he was forced to create a way or a method to achieve aims.Hamlet's aim was to discover the killer of his father and to seek revenge. Madness was the only means by which Hamlet could achieve his aim.

NOTES

¹William Shakespeare, Hamlet (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1968), ix. All subsequent references to the play are taken from this edition.

²John T. Shawcross, A Critical Study Guide to Shakespeare: Hamlet (Totowa: Littlefield, Adams and Co.,1968),25.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 24.

⁵A.C.Bradley,"Shakespeare's Tragic Period—Hamlet ," in A Collection of Critical Essays: Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet ,ed. David Bevington (New Jersey: Prentice—Hall, Inc., 1986), 13.

⁶Bernard Lott, ed., William Shakespeare Hamlet (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1968), 103.

⁷Bradly, 13-4.

⁸J.Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 43-4.

⁹Theodore Lidz , Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in Hamlet(New York: Basic Books,Inc.,1975),56.

¹⁰Bradley, 20.

¹¹Lott, lviii-lix.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Bertram Joseph, " The Theme," in A Collection of Critical Essays: Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet, ed. David Bevington (New Jersey: Prentice –Hall,Inc.,1986),93.

¹⁵Lott, lxi-lxii.

¹⁶Ibid. , lvi-lviii.

¹⁷Gillian Bennett, Alas Poor Ghost (Utah: Utah State University Press, 1999), 140.

¹⁸Ibid., lviii.

¹⁹Ibid., lix-lx.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Harold Skulsky , "Revenge,Honor, and Conscience in Hamlet," PMLA.Vol.85,No.1(Jan.,1970),78.

²³Joseph Carroll , "International Meaning in Hamlet: An Evolutionary Perspective ", New Psychologists and Modern Assessment(Spring/ Summer 2010),Vol.44,No.1-2, 236.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bennett, Gillian. Alas Poor Ghost. (Utah: Utah University Press,1999.

Bevington, David. Ed. A Collection of Critical Essays: Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet. New Jersey:Prentice-Hall,1986.

Carroll, Joseph. "International Meaning in Hamlet: An Evolutionary Perspective ". New Psychologists and Modern Assessment (Spring/ Summer 2010). Vol. 44. No.1-2.

Lidz, Theodore. Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in Hamlet. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975.

Lott, Bernard. Ed. William Shakespeare: Hamlet. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1968.

Showcross, John T. A Critical Study Guide to Shakespeare: Hamlet. Totowa: Littlefield, Adams and Co.,1968.

Skulsky, Harold. "Revenge, Honor, and Conscience in 'Hamlet'." PMLA (Jan.1970).

Wilson, J. Dover. What Happens in "Hamlet". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1964.